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# **BERNARD WILLIAMS, REPUBLICANISM, AND THE LIBERALISM OF FEAR: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

**Thom Brooks**

## **Introduction**

Bernard Williams speaks approvingly of “the liberalism of fear” (2005). The liberalism of fear is an idea first found in the writings of Judith Shklar (1989). This chapter offers a brief presentation of what is the liberalism of fear and focusses on why Williams finds this idea attractive. My argument will be that the liberalism of fear has a close affinity with the theory of republicanism, challenging the distinctiveness of the liberalism of fear. Furthermore, I will argue that republicanism represents a more compelling political philosophy more generally.

## **The Liberalism of Fear**

Fear has a special place in liberalism and the history of political thought. Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* addresses the need to avoid a world dominated by fear and much worse. We agree a social contract forming bonds of political obligation between us to avoid reverting back to a state of nature, a form of life characterized as a war of one person against all, where “notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place,” and where our lives are “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1996: 89-91). For Hobbes, it is only our “Feare of Death” that sufficiently motivates us towards peace (Hobbes 1996: 90). Note that our fear plays a positive role in directing individuals to avoid conflict in favour of peaceful security. Indeed, such motivation is a Law of Nature, for Hobbes, consistent with our natural

reason (Hobbes 1996: 91). So liberalism is no stranger to fear and they may be brought together for beneficial ends.

The so-called “liberalism of fear” addresses a related and important human need: our freedom from fear. Williams says:

We say ‘never again’, but somewhere someone is being tortured right now, and acute fear has again become a common form of social control . . . The liberalism of fear is a response to these undeniable actualities and therefore concentrates on damage control (2005: 55).

Our fear, the fear of our domination by the state, plays a crucial and constructive role in our lives. For example, the liberalism of fear helps us focus our attention upon our vulnerabilities and for good reason. Fear does not paralyze us, but it instead seeks to motivate us to action. Individual rights are here understood as a “necessary protection against threat of power” where such state power may exploit our vulnerabilities (Williams 2005: 56). Our concern for our protection of rights is not merely reactive and *post facto*, but an ever present feature of our political lives. Thus, fear plays an important and constructive role in alerting us to our vulnerabilities which, in turn, help illuminate the protective necessity of rights.

The liberalism of fear is modelled upon an antagonistic model of the self and the state. The state is conceived as some entity beyond the individual where the interests of the state may encroach upon the interests of the individual. The state is a potential “enemy” from which the individual must keep in control (Williams 2005: 56). Such an understanding about liberalism then serves a constructive role in focusing our attention on individual protections,

such as the negative rights of the individual. Fear and liberalism work together for the benefit of individuals, or so their relation has been interpreted.

This view of liberalism is neither negative nor positive, but perhaps a combination of both. For example, Williams says: “Note how this conception coincides neither with ‘negative’ nor with ‘positive’ freedom” (2005: 61). The basic idea behind the liberalism of fear is that our lacking freedom may be caused by the power of another over us. We may lack freedom by another restraining us or by our inability to do or achieve some desired goal. The perspectives of negative and positive freedom are then not wholly opposed concepts, but they share a common core: “The basic sense of being unfree is being in someone else’s power” (Williams 2005: 61). Negative freedom proponents may argue that freedom may consist in lacking interference by other persons (see Berlin 1969: 122). An individual is free when unrestrained by other persons, but only directly. For example, it is possible to be forbidden equality of opportunities that prevent me from desired goals without being restrained by another. This power others have over my pursuit of goals and interests is not captured by the idea of negative freedom. Positive freedom proponents might also claim that freedom is being under one’s own power (see Green 1991: 22). But this idea might also fail to capture the sense of our being under the power of others. Both negative and positive freedom proponents can accept that the condition of being not free is understood as our being in the power (or dominion) of someone else. We lack control.

Finally, the liberalism of fear helps serve as a constant and useful reminder. We are motivated to act by reminding ourselves of the precious freedoms and rights we possess and how fragile they are (see Williams 2005: 60). Martha Nussbaum has written about “the fragility of goodness” which is relevant here. Thus, perhaps we might speak in this case of the fragility of freedom and rights as well (see Nussbaum 1986). In other words, our fragility is not merely related to our moral goodness, but also our freedoms and rights. John Stuart

Mill speaks to this concern where he argues for the need of every society to constantly challenge and re-examine its ideas about itself in a thorough-going manner (1989). Our freedoms are fragile and require constant and careful attention. It is important to continually renew our self-understanding of how we conceive of our freedoms and how they might be best protected. It is also important that we never lose sight of our vulnerability, lest we allow our precious freedoms to slip away.

Bernard Williams is attracted to the liberalism of fear for many persuasive reasons. This political idea is suitably sensitive to our human vulnerabilities and the fragility of goodness as well as much else. It rests on neither a mere positive nor negative view of freedom, but bridges across them both and it understands that the condition of unfreedom is at root being in the power of another. Finally, the liberalism of fear conceives the individual in critical engagement with the state. The state is not necessarily a source of evil, but it is seen as a potential adversary from which the individual demands protections, such as entrenched rights.

These ideas fit together well, and the picture has persuasive power with much to recommend it. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the liberalism of fear is an especially novel understanding of political freedom because it shares too much with republicanism. Moreover, I will argue that there is more to recommend about republicanism than the liberalism of fear. If we are attracted by a liberalism of fear, then we should endorse republicanism instead. I shall turn to this discussion now.

## **Republicanism and the liberalism of fear**

I would like to contrast the liberalism of fear with its close philosophical cousin, republicanism. The tradition of republicanism has deep and ancient roots that extend to Cicero and Seneca and the tradition continues today, inspired by the work of Philip Pettit (1997) and Quentin Skinner (1997) amongst others. Indeed, republicanism arguably predates liberalism of all varieties.<sup>i</sup>

The republican tradition as defended by Pettit, for example has much in common with the liberalism of fear. Both are alive to our human vulnerabilities and the need for the protection of our fragile liberties. Likewise, both the liberalism of fear and republicanism share the appeal of limited government. This is because republicans understand freedom as non-domination and discursive control. Discursive control involves the ability to reason and interact with others (Pettit 2001: 67). All discursive parties have equal standing: if they did not have some level of equality, then the discourses of some might run roughshod over others (see Pettit 2001: 72, 75). Discursive freedom becomes possible only where non-domination obtains.

Non-domination exists where another cannot arbitrarily interfere in my affairs (Pettit 1997: 23). Crucially, it is unimportant whether anyone *does* interfere: the possibility that another may arbitrarily interfere is sufficient for domination. The republican is always on guard against arbitrary interference and control, not unlike defenders of the liberalism of fear view. The undue power of others over ourselves is an evil to be prevented.

Moreover, republicanism bridges negative and positive freedom also. Non-domination is the core of the republican idea of freedom. This is very similar to the idea that the condition of unfreedom, for a liberalism of fear, is being in the power of another. However, republicans do not oppose being in the power of another *as such* because they do not deny the possibilities of justified interference. Republicans oppose *unjustified interference only*. For

example, republicans are not against criminal punishment even if they might endorse some models of sentencing over others. This is because imprisonment for a crime, such as murder, is not necessarily an arbitrary interference. A well ordered society broadly conceived does not arbitrarily interfere in the activities and relations of its citizens, but justifiably and intentionally punishes in relation to a criminal's desert (see Brooks 2012). Some forms of interference can be justified, but there is a high threshold, and this is the need to guard against arbitrary interference understood as domination. The republican has a close eye on the power of the state and its potential threat to individual freedom not unlike the liberalism of fear.

The liberalism of fear speaks to several different elements. It focuses our attention to the problem of domination and the need for constant reappraisal of our distinct vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the liberalism of fear also helps to bridge negative and positive freedom. These elements are not unique to the liberalism of fear, but also clearly present in republican theories of freedom. I have argued above that Pettit's republican theory of freedom incorporates these same distinctive features as well.

### **Living beyond fear**

So one question we might ask is whether the liberalism of fear is simply republicanism by another name? Republicanism has been claimed to be the elder of the two traditions, but on this I am no authority. However, I do not think the issue is which came first, but which is the most compelling. Whether or not republicanism preceded liberalism (of any variety) is much less important than the issue of which view is preferable.

There is a clear difference between these competing visions. While Williams claims that ("in good times") the liberalism of fear can exist as a "politics of hope," it is difficult to

see optimism emerging from this view (2005: 61). A liberalism of fear is a standpoint of anxiety, of always looking over one's shoulder. I do not believe this vision best exemplifies our lived condition. The liberalism of fear would have it that our lives have not changed all that much since a state of nature where life is nasty, short, and even brutish. For Hobbes, individuals obey laws for fear of the punishment that might befall them if they act contrariwise. Our lives and society are maintained by the constant presence of fear: the fear of punishment, the fear of societal breakdown, the fear of others, etc. The liberalism of fear may reject Hobbes's authoritarian state, but it accepts the central role of fear in helping us forge conceptions of the individual and our relation to the state.

This Hobbesian sense of constant fear strikes me as implausible and unrealistic. The individual may require protection from some forms of state interference, but only those that are arbitrary. We do not and should not view the state as some useful beast to be safely encaged, but rather as a partner. While the state may arbitrarily infringe individual freedom, the state is not wholly other to the individual. This interrelation between the self and the state is unclear, if not lost, in the liberalism of fear yet it is captured by republicanism.

Finally, our freedoms and rights command constant protection and constructive engagement. However, it should arise primarily in response to our discursive activities with one another in positive communication rather than for fear we live on a knife's edge. This is again captured well by the republican tradition and its focus on discursive control and non-domination rather than the liberalism of fear.

## **Conclusion**



This brief chapter has outlined Williams's positive remarks in favour of the liberalism of fear. I have argued that republicanism shares much with what constitutes the liberalism of fear. However, I have also argued that it is not merely a case of the same position parading under different titles. There is a clear difference between the liberalism of fear and republicanism. This difference can be found in their competing ideas about how we relate to ourselves and each other. The liberalism of fear is a view of perpetual anxiety and antagonism; republicanism is a more positive view of constructive engagement with others and discursive control. It is a truism noted as early as Thomas Hill Green's claim that will, not force, is the basis of the state (1986: 89-106). The idea is that the reason the great majority of us obey laws is not because we fear punishment, but because we accept the laws we uphold. There is a tension in both views between the self and the state, but the two need not always be adversarial. Republicanism offers a more positive position that seems to accord best with this picture. Williams may be correct that a liberalism of fear may give rise to a new politics of hope, but I would argue that the politics of hope is best addressed by republicanism. Those who have been attracted to a liberalism of fear should choose republicanism instead.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revised version of Brooks (2011). My thanks to Chris Herrera and Bob Talisse for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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<sup>i</sup> My discussion will focus more closely on Philip Pettit's contributions to a republican theory of freedom which relate more directly with the contemporary literature on freedom.